

A Disruption Grows Up?

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By **Paul Fain**

Competency-based education could be a game-changer for adult students, probably more so than MOOCs. Yet despite the backing of powerful supporters, colleges have been reluctant to go all-in because they are unsure whether accreditors and the federal government will give the nod to degree programs that look nothing like the traditional college model.

The logjam may be breaking, however. Southern New Hampshire University is poised to launch a \$5,000 online, competency-based associate degree that would be the first to blow up the credit hour -- the connection between college credit and the time students spend learning. A regional accreditor has signed off on Southern New Hampshire's "direct assessment" method, and the university will soon apply for federal approval.

Meanwhile, about 20 institutions have joined Western Governors University with competency-based offerings that are linked in some way to the credit hour, many of them new programs, according to the Lumina Foundation. Another dozen colleges hope to get there soon.

Adding to the momentum might be a "Dear Colleague" letter the U.S. Department of Education plans to distribute this week. Observers predict that the letter, a form of regulatory guidance, would give accreditors and colleges some clarity about the department's stance on competency-based education, and would increase confidence that those programs can be eligible for federal aid.

The academy's nervousness about competency is understandable. Students learn at their own pace under the model -- without guidance from a traditional faculty member -- and try to prove what they know through assessments. If the tests lack rigor and a link to real competencies, this approach starts looking like cash for credits.

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And competency-based education is controversial even when it's backed by sound measurements of college-level learning. Most online courses share plenty with the traditional college classroom, most notably course material delivered by a professor or instructor. For example, even the massive open online versions (MOOCs) generally include video lectures. But competency-based education, by definition, eliminates this part of the learning process, typically relying instead on tutors to help students grasp concepts as they work through self-paced course material, and only if they need help.

“The models upend so much about what we understand about how education is delivered,” said Paul LeBlanc, Southern New Hampshire's president.

So while foundations and the Education Department **want to see more** competency-based programs, they are wary of a backlash.

“We see a lot of promise here,” said Kevin Corcoran, a program director at Lumina. “But we don't want to rush into this, because you really only get one chance.”

Proceed with Caution

Lumina and the Gates Foundation last month held a meeting with about 35 institutions that either do competency or want to try it. Part of the goal, Corcoran said, was to have conversations about “how to get beyond seat time,” and for colleges to share intelligence on their competency-based programs.

Northern Arizona University, for example, is **developing** three competency-based bachelor's degree programs, with Pearson as a partner. The university will work within the confines of the credit hour, said Fred Hurst, Northern Arizona's senior vice president for extended campuses. University officials are headed to Washington this week to get clarification on how their programs would be defined. The university is still working details with its regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, but plans to launch soon.

“We hope that we'll be able to do that in January,” Hurst said. “It's the right time,

so we're moving forward.”

From a federal perspective, the tension over competency-based education is about protecting aid dollars. The feds want to make sure the money is flowing to colleges that offer degrees of value, which are tied to solid learning outcomes. And those goals apply to the partisan policy brawls over for-profit colleges as well as scrutiny of competency-based offerings.

“They want good actors to do something good with this,” said Amy Laitinen, deputy director for higher education at the New America Foundation and a former Education Department official.

As a result, the Education Department is trying to seek a balance between encouraging innovative approaches with regulations that preserve academic quality. That has led to what many see as a glacial pace on competency-based education. And the federal government often appears to have a split personality on related policies: regulating the **traditional approach** to the credit hour **with restrictive vigor** while pushing innovation at meetings with higher ed reformers.

Corcoran summed up the challenge this way: “How do you be more creative without opening the spigot on financial aid for programs that aren't serving students well?”

Direct Assessment

Southern New Hampshire is a private, nonprofit college with a rapidly growing online arm. Its online enrollment of 17,000 is expected to hit 22,000 this year. The university has used revenue from its online offerings to help build up a once-drab traditional campus, located outside of Manchester.

The proposed competency-based degree program from Southern New Hampshire would break new ground, several experts said, by seeking to directly assess students' competencies rather than mapping them to credit hours. And the university last month secured approval for direct assessment from its regional accreditor, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.

Western Governors University, also a nonprofit, has gotten by far the most attention in the competency-based space. A federal law, passed in 2005, was designed to clear the way for Western Governors to participate in federal aid

programs while directly assessing student learning. The university, however, **did not pursue** that authority, partially because of worries about whether employers and accreditors would accept competency-based degrees. So Western Governors, like all other institutions, connects student competencies to the credit hour.

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A number of institutions are in discussion with the senior college commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges over the development of competency-based programs, said Ralph Wolff, the commission’s president. But none have sought direct assessment.

With its accreditor on board, Southern New Hampshire is now prepared to submit its application for direct assessment to the Education Department, and will do so as soon the Dear Colleague letter is out, if not before.

“We now essentially have a green light to move forward,” LeBlanc said. “We’ve cleared that first necessary hurdle on the way to direct assessment.”

As a back-up plan, the university will map its competency-based programs to the credit hour.

'College for America'

In January, Southern New Hampshire plans to begin offering competency-based associate degrees in general studies. The total tuition cost of the two-year degree will be \$5,000, LeBlanc said. Several other competency-based programs will follow, including bachelor's degrees, he said. The program, dubbed Pathways during the development phase, will be called College for America when it goes live.

The university will assess 120 competencies for the associate degree. Lumina’s Degree Qualifications Profile, which **attempts to define** what degree holders should know and be able to do, served as the basis for defining those competencies, along with the university’s general education goals. Other sources

were used as well, like the U.S. Department of Labor's [competency pyramids](#).

Competencies are broken into 20 distinct “task families,” which are then divided into three task levels. For example, the “using business tools” family includes tasks like “can write a business memo,” “can use a spreadsheet to perform a variety of calculations” and “can use logic, reasoning and analysis to address a business problem.”

As they progress, students will take assessments to measure their proficiency in subject matter. One test the university said it might use is the Educational Testing Service's Proficiency Profile. When students demonstrate mastery of the competencies within a given task family, they will be deemed to have the knowledge and skills necessary to pass a 100- or 200- level, three-credit course, according to the university.

Academic rigor is an important selling point, LeBlanc said. “We wanted to show people that we didn't make this up on the fly.”

The university has inked partnerships with several large employers, which have agreed to steer their workers to the future College for America. They include ConAgra Foods and the City of Memphis. Those agreements will start small, with 5-10 employees, LeBlanc said, adding that “it's been a real easy sell.”

Going first is rarely easy in higher education. And there are obviously plenty of hurdles to going after direct assessment, given that a law has been on the books for seven years and no institution has yet to pursue it.

Asked why Southern New Hampshire decided to try, LeBlanc said the university doesn't really have a choice. That's because its model is built on being ahead of the curve.

“Even as our online business is exploding, you've got to think about the next disruption,” he said. “I don't want to be doing this on the defensive.”